

ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT CLASSROOM FIRES

By doing good ads for Sal DeVito. The SVA instructor brings a drill sergeant's warmth and dedication to his mission: preparing creatives for the real world

BY HUGH MORLEY

Five years ago, Leslie Sweet was stuck working as an art director at "a small, schlocky agency" in New York, so she decided to take a School of Visual Arts advertising class conducted by Sal DeVito, currently VP-senior art director at Levine, Huntley, Schmidt & Beaver. The results were not dazzling. By the end of the class, she and her portfolio (a handful of spec ads and some of the schlocky agency stuff) had been

through dozens of fruitless interviews, and she approached DeVito to find out what she was doing wrong. As always, he was obliging. He told her, "Your work is ugly, badly produced, has no ideas, and will never get you a decent job."

Sweet recalls that DeVito took her ads—all laminated at considerable cost—and threw them in the garbage, shouting, "Look! You've got two choices: You can go out in the street with that stuff, which means you're finished. Or you can trash it, start again, work your butt off, and then I'll help you out."

She chose option two, and after five more semesters and three years she clinched a job at McCann-Erickson/New York. Now she's an art director at Chiat/Day/New York. "I was shocked," says Sweet, recalling DeVito's response. "But it was a challenge. It proved how serious he was in helping me if I was serious."

Student Ellen Jacobs also encountered DeVito's benevolent fury at a recent SVA session. After he had mercilessly panned a slew of student ads for an imaginary plant food, she suggested that one using a hackneyed "Jack and the Beanstalk" metaphor was at least better than the rest. To DeVito, whom God the Father has apparently sent to save the world from bad advertising, this was sacrilege. He walked menacingly toward her, pushing desks aside, and shouted, "You're going to learn to HATE this kind of advertising!"

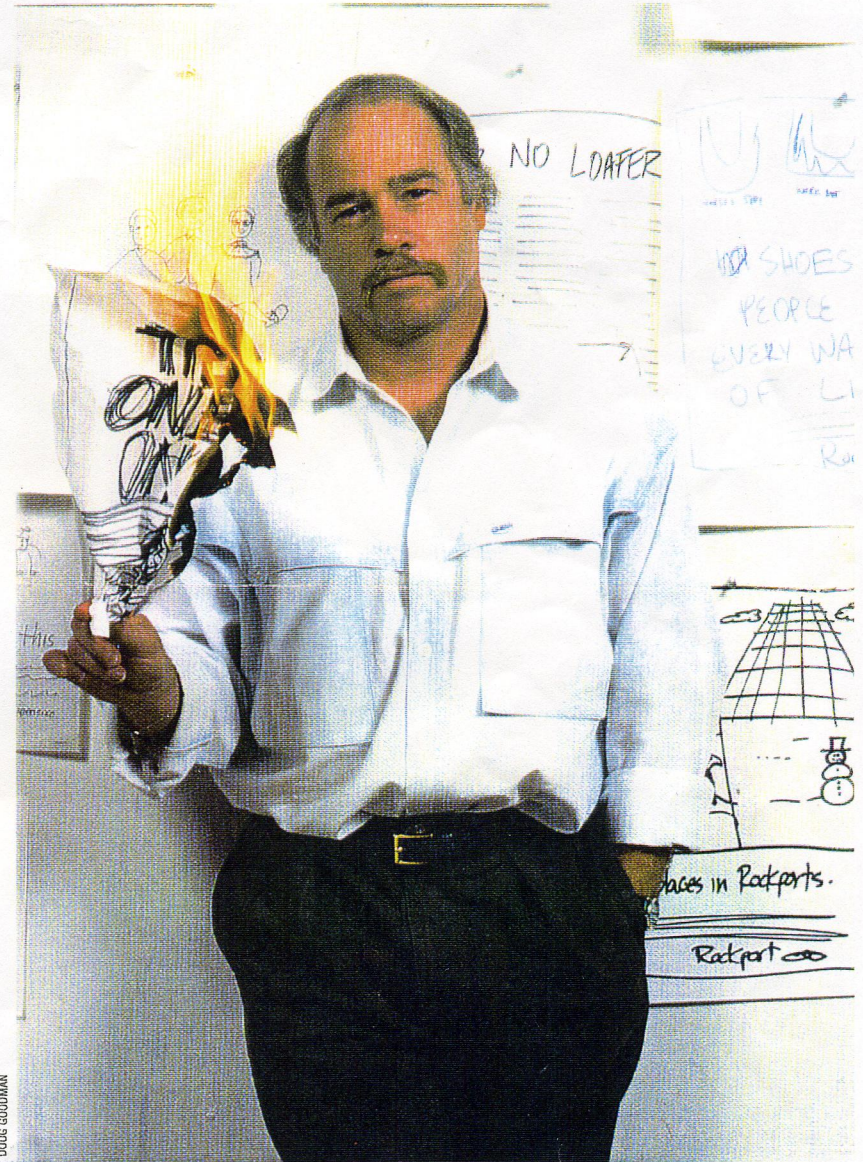
Such tales of denigration and redemption are legion among De-

Vito's past and present pupils. DeVito, unrepentant, freely admits that in utter disregard for fragile egos he has frequently thrown bad ads out the classroom's eighth-floor window—one guy said "Hey, I want that! Don't throw it away!" but, DeVito recalls, "it deserved the window, and I crumpled it up and threw it out." DeVito has even set ads on fire. "The reason I throw them out the window or burn them is so they're dead," he says laconically. "That way they can't come back."

Jacobs, who dared defend the heathen "Beanstalk" ad, initially boiled with indignation at DeVito: "I just decided either I'm going to drop this class because I can't stand him or I'm going to have to prove to him I'm not some bimbo and that I can do it."

She stuck it out, and is now in her second semester, which is precisely the way DeVito hopes students will respond. He says his "boot camp" manner has caused a few students to break down and cry, but most students sense that he cares and are able to live with his criticism. "I do it with humor," says the 40-year-old Brooklyn native. "People get a little suspicious of instructors who like everything they do. There's so much mediocre work out there, you've got to be tough. It's better to be tough in the classroom than have students find out in their first job."

DeVito has been teaching at SVA for eight years. An ad for one course he taught lists 34 copywriters and art directors who have passed under his wing on their flight to Madison Avenue—



DOUG GOODMAN

many of them to such creative hothouses as Chiat/Day and Scali, McCabe, Sloves.

DeVito explains to his students that at the heart of all great ads is a good concept and an undeniable truth about the product. He teaches through example, showing his own portfolio, inviting former students to come and display theirs. DeVito will require students to get in front of the class and sell a product (toothpaste, for example), or ask them to debate an issue (AIDS, abortion)—all in an attempt to

sharpen their thinking and provide the basis for a concept that could lead to an ad. Most important, DeVito tries to instill in students, through harsh criticism, a sense of judgment. "It's always a good test when you hear them say that *their* work isn't good enough, because then their standards are being raised," says DeVito. "The most important thing is how not to do a bad ad."

DeVito recalls his own worst-ever ad. While a student at SVA, he did an ad for a padded bra

Sal DeVito demonstrates one of the many product benefits of a Zippo

DeVito

that claimed to be exceptionally natural looking. The ad showed a picture of a bra with a sunset behind it. The headline: "Your mountains should be round." DeVito grimaces when describing it: "This will ruin my reputation forever. It was offensive and didn't know what it was saying. I would have thrown that one out the window."

DeVito hates clever wordplay, a trap new students almost always fall into. For example, using puns like "dollars and sense" for a bank ad, or "dead drunk" in an alcohol-abuse ad. As an example of how to avoid such clichés, he cites an award-winning drunk-driving ad he did in 1985 at Chiat/Day. The ad, aimed at

the monumental vanity of high-schoolers, shows a photo of a savagely scarred teenage face, headlined, "Not everyone who drives drunk dies. Don't drive drunk."

"It's strong, no bullshit advertising—intelligent thinking with impact," says DeVito, who adds that his best advice to students is "give it more thinking."

DeVito clearly gives a lot of thought to his own work; at his best, he combines images and words seamlessly. At Chiat/Day he did a Drexel Burnham ad showing a man whose face is drastically narrowed by photographic distortion; the headline reads: "Do your profits reflect your thinking?" A recent AIDS PSA now running in Maryland may very well be the tightest, most dead-on plea to date on behalf of condom use. Above a small photo of a condom reads a headline in eerily shimmering type: "Prevent life and

death all in one shot."

At 6:30 on a Monday night in May, beneath the fluorescent glare in an SVA classroom, DeVito leads some 20 aspiring creatives—a collection of ambitious secretaries, unemployed career students and assorted graphic and mechanical artists, most between 25 and 30—through the final class of the spring semester. He estimates that eight of the original class have already dropped out since the term began; maybe five will eventually make it to agency jobs.

Short and balding, with a friendly mustache, DeVito seems strangely at odds with his fearsome reputation. At the front of the classroom he's displaying student solutions to last week's assignment to create an ad for Zippo lighters. He begins by asking what product benefits Zippo offers. "Nostalgia," someone suggests; it's 5+

years old. "It's wind resistant," says another. DeVito, a nonsmoker, says he likes to walk around just flipping the lid; maybe they can use that.

He turns to the ads on the wall. "Let's kill all the nonsense up here right away," he says, pulling the first student ad from the wall for criticism. It shows a large illustration of a Zippo side by side with a Bic. The headline reads, "Running on empty—buy a Zippo refillable lighter."

DeVito frowns. "This is an ad for Bic," he says, "because Bic will last much longer than Zippo per fill."

DeVito studies a half-page picture of an old man alongside supporting copy: "This is the Zippo lighter granddad lit the torch with for our glass studio."

"Boring," says DeVito. "And you know why? Because there's a whole tradition of 'this is the same one . . .' ads. Too hokey

and too 'I've heard it before.'"

A third, showing the Marx Brothers, is headlined, "In 1929 there was Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Zeppo and Zippo."

"Ugh!!" groans DeVito. "It's a cute way of saying it's been around for a while, but you totally forgot about the product. If it's got something to offer—say it!" The best student ad DeVito can recall for Zippo was one that emphasized the lighter's prime product advantage: the fact that it's refillable. The ad showed a Bic disposable lighter accompanied by the headline, "This lighter will last a lifetime too, you just won't be able to use it."

As an SVA student himself in 1968 and 1969, DeVito studied under the likes of Bob Giraldi, Bob Reitzfeld, and Chet Lane, now creative director at Jordan, McGrath, Case & Taylor. His

first position was at New York agency Conahay & Lyon in 1970. Soon after he started there, Giraldi, then at Della Femina, Travisano & Partners, called to ask if he knew of a young art director looking for a job. DeVito passed up the opportunity, and now says that was "the biggest mistake of my career." He subsequently endured 10 years of creative frustration, a period during which, as DeVito tells it, the invariable reaction to his best work was: "We can't do this. We can't say this. They'll never buy this."

During DeVito's dark decade, he worked at six agencies and even pumped gas for a while after he was fired from Ted Bates. He feels the period was epitomized by an incident at Young & Rubicam in 1976. While working on ads for New York Telephone's Touch-tone service, he came up

with the line, "Touch Tone: for people tired of going around in circles." But the ad was nixed by the account director. The problem? It implicitly knocked the company's rotary phones. After much heated argument, it ran, and won a Gold at the 1977 One Show.

DeVito says his career picked up in 1983 when he got a job at Penchina, Selkowitz. In 1985 he moved to Chiat/Day/New York, and a year later took a position at HCM. There he picked up a Cannes Silver Lion at Cannes for a Peugeot commercial depicting the French as even better car-makers than lovers; the spot culminates when a Peugeot crashes through a wall onto a Frenchman's bed.

Most recently, with his move to LHS&B last year, DeVito's unconventional Genesee cream

ale spots have attracted attention and won Mobius and New York Addy awards. They variously feature bucking rodeo cowboys, chainsaw jugglers and hoop-jumping poodles as indications of the product's departure from ordinary beer.

Outside the classroom, DeVito remains accessible to his students via an open-door policy at his LHS&B office. Students frequently mail him samples of their work, or drop by to discuss assignments. When a student finally has a book together, DeVito will critique it and assess the person's job-seeking readiness. He will pass on news of any job openings he hears of; and put in a good word to prospective employers whenever possible.

"He takes the mentor thing very seriously," says fellow LHS&B art director and former

DeVito student Rich Ostroff. "If you reach a level that he thinks is good enough, he'll take you under his wing."

Before landing his first job in 1980, partly on the strength of just eight DeVito-guided ads in his book, Ostroff drove a cab and attended evening classes. By day, he'd stop at phone booths to bounce ideas off his teacher.

Renee Mandis, a copywriter at Ammirati & Puris who took DeVito's class in 1984, points out that DeVito's teaching method is remarkably similar to the real world. "It teaches you to be hard," she says. "You have to take a lot of criticism and you also have to sell Sal on an idea just like you have to sell a creative director a piece of work. If you can't take a Sal DeVito class, you're not going to make it in the real world."